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Student helps educate Sevier parents on air quality

By Lark Reynolds

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Parents waiting in the car line to pick up their children at Sevier Middle School know what it means when they see Ben Norris heading their way.

Norris, a seventh-grader, is a member of the school's recently formed Air Patrol, and he and other seventh-grade students walk down the car line on their assigned day and ask drivers to turn their engines off to improve air quality.

Norris said the Air Patrol is part of a larger program at the school called SAFE, or Sevier Ambassadors for the Environment, which also has a recycling component. The SAFE program was funded by a grant from the state Department of Health and Environmental Control.

Norris said before members of the Air Patrol -- also referred to as B², for "breathe better" -- started asking people to turn off their engines, they learned about the importance of air quality, and how exhaust affects it, during a presentation by the Greenville County Planning Department's air quality education specialist.

Then they spent several weeks collecting data on the percentage of cars in the waiting line that let their engines idle. Norris said he's seen that number drop, now that they've started patrolling the line.

Although many of the adults he's spoken with were delighted to cooperate, Norris said others weren't as interested.

Norris' teacher Ginger Barbare, one of two teachers heading up the Air Patrol, said students are excited to think that their actions are positively affecting air quality at the school.

"Today's students are genuinely concerned about how the actions of humans can affect our school community," Barbare said.

Ten students, split into two teams, currently make up the Air Patrol. The two teams patrol the car line on alternating days. Norris said many students have other activities they are involved with after school, so it's tough to generate a lot of interest in the Air Patrol.

"A lot of them have extracurricular activities like football, stuff besides B², so they don't really pay much attention to it," Norris said. "But the kids that did join really go all out for helping B²."

In addition to gathering data and asking drivers not to idle their engines, Norris and the other Air Patrol members made signs with the same message, which have been placed around the car line. They also have B² T-shirts and lanyards they wear when patrolling

the car line.

It seems parents are catching on. Norris said he notices that some drivers now turn off their engines as they see him approaching.

"I think it's really good that people are actually listening and not just ignoring us, because we're a bunch of seventh-graders, and they're the adults," Norris said. "I'm glad that they actually do listen to us."